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SUBJECT Interview With Fidel Castro, Part I

ROBERT MACNEIL: Our major focus section tonight is a newsmaker interview with Cuban President Fidel Castro. Last month the U.S. and Cuba successfully negotiated an agreement under which Cuba will take back 2500 undesirables who came in the Mariel boatlift of 1980 and the United States will reopen normal immigration procedures in Havana. Since then, Castro's said he'd be willing to talk further about improving relations. Washington has reacted coldly, saying Castro is saying nothing new, and it wants to see Cuban deeds, not words.

How far Castro wishes to push his new effort has not been clear. But in Havana, part of his motivation is obvious.

Havana today expresses the weaknesses of the Cuban revolution. Its successes are in the countryside, where better nutrition, health care and education have changed more lives. Havana, the symbol of the decadent past, was neglected, with little new building.

But with an economy still unable to meet all Fidel's goals an acute need for hard currency, old Havana is getting a facelift to attract tourists. Buildings and streets from the Spanish colonial period are being refurbished, as is the square of the old cathedral.

The bulk of the tourists are still people from the Eastern Bloc, their presence symbolizing Castro's dependence on the communist world for economic survival in the face of the American trade blockade. That's been in force for a quarter of a century and has been tightened by the Reagan Administration.

Cuba's lifeline is a procession of Soviet merchant ships

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bringing virtually everything, from oil and lumber to light bulbs. They return taking Cuban sugar, citrus and nickel, but recently not enough to meet the plan quotas.

So Cuban consumers have been asked to tighten their belts again, to wait for more attractive consumer goods, while a big drive is made to boost exports to the Soviet Bloc and to the West, both to meet Cuba's commitments to her communist partners and to earn hard currency to pay her Western debts.

This is the context for the growing suggestions that Castro, 26 years after his revolution, would like to patch things up with the U.S.

There is no slackening of revolutionary zeal. The spirit that defeated the Bay of Pigs invasion of 1961 is constantly nourished, and the symbols of Castro's rise to power are a national shrine. The revolution is still young enough to enjoy tweaking Uncle Sam's beard. This poster says, "Mr. Imperialist, we are absolutely not afraid of you." It is located close to the U.S. Mission, now called the U.S. Interest Section because there are no full-scale diplomatic relations, where U.S. officials try to read the signals that Castro is sending.

On Friday night President Castro sat down with me for the first major American television interview in six years. With a Cuban government interpreter, we talked for more than four hours, first about relations with the United States.

Mr. President, every time that you begin to talk about improving relations with the United States, Washington says, "Show us deeds, not words." What actions or deeds are you prepared to make to improve relations with the United States?

FIDEL CASTRO: You said many times I speak of improving relations. Actually, there are not many times.

Now then, I have read a few statements in which it is said that they want deeds and not words. I believe that that is a style of speaking. I would say a style of a great power. I understand that it is not easy for the United States to change its style. We are a small country. We cannot speak in those terms. But we are also a country with a lot of dignity, and no one can suppose that we would beg the United States for an improvement of relations. We have never done so, and we shall never do it.

My intention is not that they believe what we say; but, rather, simply to analyze our ideas and to go deeper in them, to make objective analyses of events. It is not a matter of faith, of confidence. It is a matter of objectivity.

MACNEIL: Let's go through an objective analysis. The State Department and the White House always say that there are three obstacles to improving relations between Cuba and the United States, and they are your allegiance to the Soviet Union, what they call subversion in this hemisphere, and the large number of your troops in Africa. Sometimes they also mention human rights in Cuba. The White House mentioned human rights in Cuba this week again.

Can we discuss in detail each of these, starting with relations with the Soviet Union?

Is there a formula by which you could keep your ties to the Soviet Union and improve relations with the United States?

CASTRO: If the United States believed that there are three obstacles, actually there are quite few -- quite little. I thought there were much more.

Now then, if we analyze these three types of obstacles, the first -- that is, the relations that we have with the Soviet Union, with the socialist countries, and with any other country are matters of our sovereignty, and in fact cannot be questioned; or, at least, we are not ready to discuss that.

And this is always -- this is something that I always say in a very frank way. If in order to improve our relations with the United States we must give up our convictions and our principles, then relations will not improve on those grounds. If we are going to question our sovereignty, then they will not improve, either. Relations between Cuba and the Soviet Union are based in the most strict respect for independence and sovereignty of our country. We have friendly relations, very close relations, and these relations cannot be affected in order to improve relations with the United States.

I believe that the United States would not respect a country that would do such a thing. The countries that do those things simply are not respected. And actually, we are not going to change neither our flag nor our ideas. And our relations with the Soviet Union and our friendship will be maintained intangible [sic]. I say this being fully frank and fully sincere. And it is necessary that this be understood.

MACNEIL: The Director of Cuban Affairs in the State Department, Kenneth Scoog (?), he said in a speech in December, "What Cuba could not do and still retain Moscow's favor is to alter its fundamental commitment to unswerving support for Soviet policy."

And so my question is, isn't that unswerving support for

Soviet policy the price of the Soviet aid that keeps the Cuban economy going?

CASTRO: Well, we coincide in many things with the Soviet Union because we have a community of political principles. It is a socialist country. We are a socialist country. We do have many things in common with the Soviet Union. And in many international problems, we have our common stands. That is based on political ideas and principles. It is a friendly country of whose friendship we will not reject and of which we cannot feel ashamed of. Because, actually, we are not going to fight with our friends to become friends of our adversaries. That we shall never do. And the Soviets have never imposed any conditions on us, on their assistance. And they have never attempted to tell us what we should do, what we must do, with which countries we ought to trade, and with which countries should we have relations.

So, I simply can't understand where these theories come from -- that is, that our relations with the Soviets are an obstacle. And if someone thinks that we are going to sell out or that we are going to give up our banners or our flags or that we are going to change our ideas, that is in error. Cuba is a country that cannot be bought. And countries that are bought are simply not respected.

MACNEIL: I think what the United States Government is saying is that your economic dependence on Moscow makes you automatically a part of the Soviet camp, in having to agree to policies like the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan.

Would you, Fidel Castro, who values the independence and integrity of a small country, would you alone have approved the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan if you had been free to make your own choice? Did you, privately and personally, approve of the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan?

CASTRO: When it was put forth at the U.N. -- that is, the question, the issue -- we said clearly that in that conflict, in that attack, that tremendous attack against the Soviet Union led by the United States, we were not going to be on the side of the United States, simply not. And we were then on the side of the Soviet Union. In other words, we did not deal or delve on the topic. That is what we said: This is our position because of this.

MACNEIL: But isn't that the point, that your friendship and dependence on the Soviet Union makes you part of the camp, and therefore take positions which Washington regards as anti-American positions?

CASTRO: You establish this dependency, or something,

that is actual. In fact -- but in today's world, in the economic arena, no one is absolutely independent, not even the United States, nor Japan, nor Western Europe. They depend on oil, raw materials. And from many other countries, they need markets, they need trade. That is, no country is totally independent economically.

MACNEIL: Is it not true that your role, in return for all the aid you get from the Soviet Union, is to be a thorn in America's side?

CASTRO: If that were true, we would not be talking about improving relations with the United States. If our role is to be a thorn, then it would not be convenient for us.

Actually, it does not bring us great benefits, either. That is, we are based on a conviction and it is the necessity to struggle in our area, in Central America, throughout the world. It is a duty, actually a duty that we have in order to lower tensions and to achieve relations of peace as well. And I say this sincerely, although I am a revolutionary, I was a revolutionary, I am a revolutionary, and I shall always be a revolutionary, and I will not change a single of my principles for a thousand relations with a thousand countries like the United States.

MACNEIL: Will the Soviet Union continue to provide you with the aid and support it does, do you believe, if you have good relations with the Soviet -- with the United States?

CASTRO: Look, our relations with the Soviet Union, with the socialist countries are solid things based on principles and have absolutely nothing to do with our economic and political relations with the United States.

I will say one thing, though. The Soviet Union and the Soviet people feel great appreciation and great respect toward Cuba. But it is -- they respect Cuba because they admire us, others people do, the courage of Cuba, Cuba's staunchness, and Cuba's capability to resist for over 26 years the aggressions, the economic blockade, and the brutality of the United States.

MACNEIL: Would the Soviet Union like it if you had better relations with the United States, the blockade perhaps were lifted, and the economic burden on the Soviet Union were shared or lessened?

CASTRO: The United States will pay us for our sugar at the price of the Soviets, or will they be buying the nickel, and they will be maintaining the type of relations and trade that we have with the socialist countries? But I believe the idea

that we have any needs to trade with the United States should be totally eradicated. Everything we have done during these 26 years, we have done it without trade with the United States. And our future has been conceived without trade with the United States.

Actually, we have not asked from the Soviet Union. Generally, we don't ask their opinion on our economic or political relations in an international arena. But I know the Soviet Union very well and I know the policy of the Soviet Union. And the Soviet Union would never be against Cuba's developing its economic relations with the other capitalist countries, including the United States.

MACNEIL: So, to move on to the second point that Washington says is an obstacle to better relations, what the White House spokesman, Larry Speakes, called this week your subversion in the hemisphere.

Let me quote you again Mr. Scoog of the State Department. "It is Cuba's striving, with Soviet support, to introduce Marxist-Leninist regimes throughout the hemisphere which still lies at the heart of our differences."

Would you comment on that?

CASTRO: Well, I could also accuse the Pope of practicing subversion in Latin America and preaching Christianity and Catholicism. He has visited the countries even recently. He met with natives and said that the land had to be given to the natives, and the land properties. And he declared that schools were necessary for the children, jobs for the workers and for the families, medicine and doctors for the ill, and also foodstuffs or housing.

What we preach is more or less that. And besides, it is what we have done in our country.

So then, we will continue being Marxists and we'll continue being socialists. And we will always say that our social system is more just. But we have said also, because we are convinced about it, we have said the following, and which is my answer to that: Neither can Cuba export revolution, because revolutions cannot be exported. And the economic, social factors, the cultural, historical factors that determine the boom of the revolution cannot be exported.

The external, the huge external debt of Latin America cannot be exported. The formula applied by the International Monetary Fund cannot be exported by Cuba. The unequal trade cannot be exported by Cuba. Underdevelopment and poverty cannot

be exported by Cuba. And that is why Cuba cannot export revolution. It is absurd. It is ridiculous to say that the revolutions can be exported.

But the United States cannot, on the other hand, avoid them, either. The United States accuses us maybe of wanting to promote change. Well, we would like to see changes occur. But changes will come whether the United States likes it or not, whether or not Cuba likes it.

I could answer by saying that the United States wants to maintain an unjust social order that has meant for the people's of this hemisphere poverty, hunger, underdevelopment, diseases, ignorance. And the United States wants to maintain that.

And we could also say that the United States wants to avoid change. We are accused of wanting to promote change. We can also accuse the United States of wanting to avoid change and of wanting to maintain an unjust social regime.

But actually, neither can we export it, nor can the revolution avoid it -- nor can the United States avoid it.

MACNEIL: In supporting militarily the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua, is Cuba not helping to sustain and introduce a Marxist-Leninist regime?

CASTRO: In helping Nicaragua, by offering military cooperation? Well, we are helping an independent country. We are helping a just revolution to defend itself. That's simply what we're doing. In the same way that, for example, the United States has also sent their weapons to this hemisphere to other people. It sent weapons to Somoza. It sent weapons to Trujillo when Trujillo was there. It sent weapons to Pinochet. It sent weapons to all of the repressive governments of Latin America, governments that murdered, tortured dozens of thousands of people, governments which disappeared tens of thousands of people. They had no moral obstacle in giving any economic, financial, and military assistance to these governments.

So, with what moral grounds can it be questioned -- that is, can our right be questioned to help Nicaragua, and Nicaragua's right to receive that aid?

I ask the following: Can the United States help the counterrevolutionary bands, supply weapons to them, explosives to fight inside Nicaragua, something that has meant the lives of thousands and thousands of people, and on the other hand question Cuba's right and Nicaragua's right for us to give them economic, technical aid, and even some cooperation in the military field?

MACNEIL: So you would not stop giving such aid as a condition of improved relations with the United States.

CASTRO: We shall not make any unilateral decision in our relations and cooperation with Nicaragua. What we have said is that in Central America a political negotiated solution is possible. What we say is that we support the effort of Contadora to seek solutions of peace in Central America, that we support it staunchly, sincerely, and that we believe that political solutions exist and peace solutions exist that are convenient for Nicaraguans, for Central America, and for the United States itself. And we are ready to struggle for that. And also, in fact, the agreements that are reached shall be complied by us in a determined way. That is, any agreement reached between Nicaragua and the Contadora framework shall be complied by us to the very limit.

MACNEIL: How hopeful are you that -- now that some political settlement can be reached in Central America?

CASTRO: I am absolutely convinced. I have a lot of information about the work of Contadora effort or the discussions of the burning issues there, the positions of the United States, Nicaragua's positions. And I am convinced, fully convinced, that it is possible to find formulas that will be acceptable by all parties, or to all parties. I have that conviction. I'm convinced about that.

Now then, for it, it is necessary for the United States to want to really cooperate in finding a political solution. I believe that as long as the United States is convinced that it can destroy the Sandinista revolution from within by combining the effect of the economic measures against Nicaragua with the economic difficulty inside Nicaragua and the actions of the counterrevolutionary bands, as long as they're convinced that they can destroy the revolution from within, it will not be seriously ready to seek a political solution to the problems of Central America. Because if it believes that it will destroy the revolution, why negotiate, then? Why reach agreements?

Now then, now, when the United States becomes persuaded that it shall not achieve that goal, that the Nicaraguan revolution cannot be destroyed from within -- because of the questions I mentioned, problems I mentioned, I believe that they can face the economic problems with what they produce and with the aid they are receiving, the economic aid they're receiving. If they handle it correctly, efficiently, they can face the economic problems. I'm convinced of that.

I am also convinced that they can defeat the bands, and that the bands will never be able to defeat...

MACNEIL: Excuse me. By "the bands" you mean what are called in the United States the Contras.

CASTRO: Yes. The counterrevolutionary bands. That will be defeated -- they will be defeated.

So, then a situation will come up before the United States -- that is, the United States will have no other alternative but to negotiate seriously to seek a solution, or invade Nicaragua. And since in my view, in my criteria, a U.S. invasion in Nicaragua is unconceivable, since it would mean such a serious mistake, a terrible mistake, that I do not simply think that the United States would really get to the point of making that mistake. I cannot assure you that it might not do it, but I say that it is unconceivable that under the present circumstances in Latin America, under the present circumstances of crisis, with the present feeling on the part of the Latin American peoples, at the times we're living in, the aggression and invasion against a Latin American country would be as catastrophic, in political terms, it would mean such a political cost, and not only a political cost, but also in terms of U.S. lives.

MACNEIL: Let me turn to Africa. The third of those obstacles that Washington sees to improving relations with you, your troops in Angola. You talked recently about circumstances arising which would cause you to bring them home. What would happen -- what would have to happen to start bringing the Cuban troops out of Angola?

CASTRO: What is needed there? Well, discussions have taken place, with the participation of the United States. The United States has had dialogues, talks with Angola's leadership. We are informed, through the Angolans, about these negotiations or talks that have been held, with our support and with our full cooperation. That is, they have carried out these negotiations in close contact with Cuba.

MACNEIL: Could you withdraw any of your troops before there is agreement?

CASTRO: No. No. The Angolans would not agree with that. And from our point of view, it would be a mistake. And the Angolan proposal -- that is, if those circumstances come up, then Angola commits itself, then Cuba, of course, would support it, to withdraw in a period of three years what is called the grouping of troops in the south, which is made up by approximately 20,000 men. And even the figure was given.

This is the bulk of our troops, actually. But there are still troops in the center and to the north of Angola, including Cabinda. The Angolans have not included these troops in the

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negotiations, these present negotiations. And their position is that to withdraw those troops, it will be something that would have to be discussed between Angola and Cuba, whenever it is considered that they can dispense of these troops.

MACNEIL: Do you think that this projected settlement of the Angola situation, does that erase Cuban troops in Angola as an issue between you and the United States?

CASTRO: Before, there were no troops in Angola, and relations were very bad with the United States. Today, were there no troops in Angola, or in some other place, or there are no advisers in Central America, maybe the United States might invent something else.

MACNEIL: Just to sum up our conversation about improving relations with the United States, why is this the right time to raise this? And realistically speaking, how hopeful are you that it can happen?

CASTRO: Whether this is the right, best moment, I believe that if the United States is objective, if it is realistic, I would say that it is the best moment for the United States. Not for us. Actually, we can go on for five, 10, 15, 20 more years.

The only obligation on our part, really, is toward peace. If there's peace here and in other areas, we will feel more pleased. If the relations are normalized, even more pleased. Because it would be, then, a progressive progress. Peace is convenient for all. But from the political point of view, I'm convinced, and I'm saying this frankly, I think that the United States benefits most than us. We can sit here and wait calmly and see what happens in the coming years.

MACNEIL: Tomorrow night Fidel Castro talks candidly about human rights in Cuba, political prisoners, dissent, the controlled press, and the mistakes of his revolution. He also discusses what he sees as an explosive economic situation in Latin America.